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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 001029

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/17/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI BAPTIST PASTOR IMPRISONED

REF: BAKU 00794

Classified By: POL/ECON Chief Joan Polaschik for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Emboff met with Baku-based Baptist leader Ilya Zenchenko on August 14 to learn more about the recently concluded trial of Baptist Pastor Zaur Balaev. Per reftel, Balaev, a pastor in the northwestern village of Aliabad, was arrested on May 20. Balaev was charged with using violence against police officers who asked him to come to the local police station. Local Baptists strongly disagree with the authorities' claim that Balaev resisted coming to the police station and physically assaulted the police.

2. (SBU) Zenchenko confirmed that Balaev was sentenced on August to two years at the Ganja prison for assaulting five police officers. Zenchenko observed that the stiff sentence was a surprise, as many Baptists had thought Balaev would get only six months. Balaev intends to appeal his case to an Azerbaijani appeals court, and Zenchenko said that if necessary, the Baptists would apply to the European Court of Human Rights.

3. (C) Zenchenko, who witnessed parts of the trial, claimed the government's case against Balaev was unprofessional and based on shaky evidence. The prosecution rested on the testimony of four or five witnesses, none of whom were first-hand witnesses at the scene of the alleged crime. Two of the witnesses admitted that they learned of Balaev's attack while at a teahouse and a local bazaar. Zenchenko stated that there was some discontinuity between the prosecution's witnesses' testimony. One or two of the witnesses also admitted that they signed a statement against Balaev without fully understanding what the statement said. The government's physical evidence was a police car door that Balaev reportedly damaged and a police uniform that had a button torn from it.

4. (C) Zenchenko thanked the Embassy for its efforts to raise Balaev's case with the GOAJ. In response to our question as to whether local Baptists have been able to access Balaev since his imprisonment, Zenchenko said that he has not yet tried to meet with Balaev. Zenchenko pledged to contact us if he has a problem in accessing Balaev.

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